Modern Peacemakers:

Inhabiting Both the Earthly City and the City of God

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered as a contribution to the Pendle Hill Tuesday morning lecture series at Medford Leas.
Medford, New Jersey

November 3, 1998

Thank you all for coming to this third lecture in the Pendle Hill series on "Challenging Some Quaker Assumptions." I am very happy to be speaking here at Medford Leas. I suppose many of you might be aware that my parents, Andrew and Dorothy Seeger, having been living here at Medford Leas for the past six years, so I feel right at home.

Pendle Hill is charged with serving as a spiritual and intellectual resource for the Religious Society of Friends, and in designing the present lecture series we were trying to be helpful to Friends by focusing on certain circumstances where the changing conditions of modern life might call the traditional approaches to our religious faith into question. I am going to talk about the Friends peace testimony. I realize that many, many people here at Medford Leas are not Friends, but come from other faith backgrounds. So I hope those who are Friends among us will bear with me if I preface my remarks with a short bit of background for the benefit of those here who may be less familiar with Quakerism.

The Quaker movement, a branch of the Christian Church, started in England in the mid-1600s. Those of you interested in English history will remember that this was a very turbulent time when the painful transition from the middle ages to the modern era was occurring. A great and terrible civil war took place, with an army assembled by the English Parliament on one side, and an army loyal to the King, on the other. In 1649 the Parliamentary army finally prevailed, King Charles I was imprisoned and eventually beheaded, and Oliver Cromwell was installed as head of government with the title of Lord Protector. A period of republican government followed. But it lasted only a little more than a decade, that is, until 1660, when it collapsed in confusion upon Cromwell's death, and the monarchy was restored.

Religion and politics were closely connected in those days. The King was the head of the Church in England. The church levied its own taxes, known as tithes. The upper levels of the clergy, the bishops, were closely allied with titled people at court, and the common people were oppressed by a sort of ecclesiastical/aristocratic complex. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan movement he headed offered some alternative to this, but they, too, were intolerant of views other than their own, and they adhered to a very pessimistic assessment of the human condition and of human nature. Oliver Cromwell's regime is as often described as a dictatorship as it is as a form of republicanism.

In this turbulent milieu the Quaker movement sprang up offering an alternative to both high church Anglicanism and to Puritanism. Despairing of the clergy and of the modes of worship of both parties, Quakers began a movement without a priesthood and without an ordained clerical leadership of any kind. Friends sought to establish a ministry of all believers. Instead of liturgies and rituals, Friends gathered simply in silence and waited for an inspiration from God to move any member of the meeting to speak. Friends believed that by attending to the spirit of God as revealed in the hearts of the people Christianity could be restored to the state of perfection experienced by Jesus and the apostles. Thus Friends sought to revive or to restore primitive Christianity or the Christianity of the apostolic age. They believed it was possible for contemporary people to achieve the same kind of transparency to God that was in Jesus himself, and that the Christ spirit resided in everyone. They believed it possible to achieve this pure knowledge of Truth and this state of sanctity without the help of any clergy. Needless to say, this seemed arrogant, pretentious, and blasphemous to the people around these early Friends, and they were vigorously persecuted for their views.

Friends believed that it followed from their idea of that of God within that if only people were turned to faithfulness to their own inner Christ-spirit, they would begin to behave differently and social arrangements could begin to conform to God's will; peace and justice would come to earth. So Friends had many radical expectations about God-led social and political behavior. They believed in the equality of men and women, and allowed women to speak in their spontaneous worship and to exert leadership on the same basis as men. They established schools where women could learn mathematics and science on the same basis as men. Their schools also reflected the philosophy that it was not necessary to teach by rote or to use corporeal punishment, but that the natural goodness and the innate love of learning in each student could be elicited by sensitive pedagogy. They believed in racial equality, and eventually many Friends became active in the movement to abolish slavery. Friends believed in human equality in general, and refused to remove their hats in the presence of the King, and they addressed everyone with the familiar forms of address, that is with "thee" and "thou," rather than using polite forms based on class distinctions. Friends refused to take oaths in court because they felt that Christ-like people spoke the truth always, and taking an oath would imply that they might lie when they were not under oath. They refused to haggle about prices in business, feeling that the common practice of requesting an inflated price for goods and then allowing it to be whittled down in a bargaining process was basically and exercise in untruthfulness. Friends in business therefore introduced the single price and the price tag system. Many of these views caused grief among the

contemporaries of early Friends, both monarchists and republicans, both Anglo-Catholics and Puritans.

Since the earliest days of the Quaker movement Friends have sought to apply Christian principles to society and politics, refusing to accept the idea that the teachings of Jesus were impractical or irrelevant. They have sought to be creative and pro-active in addressing social issues.

One of the issues Friends have been led to address in relatively recent times is the situation of the elderly in modern society. Let me use a personal friend of mine just as an example. My friend, Peter Bien, is a professor at Dartmouth College. He and his wife, Chrysanthi, have three children. Peter and Chrysanthi live in Hanover, New Hampshire, where, of course, Dartmouth College is located. Their daughter lives in London, while one of their sons lives in Washington, D.C., and the other lives in Jakarta, Indonesia. Modern life simply has dismantled the village system where generation after generation of extended families once lived in close proximity to each other and where this network provided a community which incorporated the older generation both as care givers and as receivers of care. Seeing these trends, Friends like Tak Moriuchi and Lois Forrest pioneered the development of communities of elders such as Medford Leas to address a common situation. Establishing continuing care communities for elders has not been controversial the way some other Friends activities have been, but it required a lot of vision and spiritual discernment, nevertheless. So all of us here today are participants in and beneficiaries of the long tradition of Quaker social activism.

Many Friends testimonies are now commonly accepted – ideas on gender and racial equality, on education, the price tag system. But some aspects of Friends faith remain a minority view. Not too many other religious groups have abolished the clergy or adopted the practice of worshiping in silence. My topic today, the Friends peace testimony, is one aspect of Quakerism which remains outside the mainstream of European and American social thought. The idea that warfare and killing is always wrong, and that only strategies of non-violence should be employed when conflict arises remains a minority conviction held by only a few small groups, like the Quakers, the Mennonites, and the Church of the Brethren. Individual members of other Christian religious groups, and of the Jewish and Islamic religious communities, can hold similar views, but they are a small minority within their respective denominations.

The Friends peace testimony was enunciated in the earliest days of the Friends movement. Like many other Friends practices, the peace testimony arose out of a combination of attention to scripture and observation of what was going on around Friends, observations guided by the Holy Spirit. According to scripture, Jesus' teaching seemed unambiguously pacifist to these early Friends; at the same time, the horrors of the civil war which they witnessed reinforced a conviction that militarism could not be reconciled with a Christian life.

My goal today is to offer a few observations about contemporary affairs as these bear on Friends' practice of their peace testimony. Let us consider today's world.

Is it not true that we live in a time of profound confusion? Disagreement and doubt are pervasive in almost all nations. Few societies or individuals enjoy a life of untroubled certitude and, judging from the disorder of the world, few societies or individuals are living in a way expressive of divine truth.

We do know one thing with some certainty. As members of the Religious Society of Friends seeking to uphold our traditional peace testimony, we know we face a world which has changed radically in the last ten years. Most of the conditions and suppositions which have guided our approach to our peace witness since World War II simply no longer obtain.

It has indeed been disappointing that the ending of the Cold War and of the polarized rivalry between two nuclear superpowers has not ushered in an era of peace. The situations in the former Yugoslavia, and in Somalia, Chechnya, Chiapas, Iraq, Tibet, Afghanistan, Rwanda, the Middle East, Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka remind us that lives continue to be lost in the most cruel and gruesome sorts of warfare. Moreover, in a way that is both very silent and very difficult to grasp, a global economy is taking shape which often puts masses of people at the mercy of a few, even though we do not call it slavery; these global economic arrangements may lead to malnutrition and death, even though we do not call it murder.

So, even though the threat of nuclear omnicide, a killing off of everyone and everything in one reckless moment, has receded, the challenges facing peace-concerned people today are as great as those of the Cold War period, at least when considered in terms of actual human suffering. Trafficking and profiteering in arms, an activity of both private businesses and of governments, clearly bodes only ill for the human family. The weapons trade grossly misallocates the resources of a hungry and poverty-stricken world, renders the sensible resolution of conflicts enormously more difficult, and allows the outbreaks of violence which occur to be ever more destructive. Chemical and biological weapons are a growing threat. Iraq used chemical and biological weapons when it was at war with Iran. The chemical attacks in Matsumoto, Japan and in the Tokyo subway remind us of the easy availability of chemical and biological weapons, and of a growing erosion of what was once an almost universal repugnance at their use. Materials sufficient to put vast populations at risk can be produced in a medium-sized room by a few people with only a modest command of technical knowledge. There is ample evidence that both nations and small terrorist groups are stockpiling agents capable of causing the most cruel deaths to countless millions of people.

For the last several centuries, people who have given thought to the matter of international peace have understood that the condition of anarchy which prevails *among* nations offers a stark contrast to the characteristics of order and government *within* nations, and that the outbreak of international conflict and bloody war is a consequence, at least in substantial part, of this condition of anarchy, of the lack of any way of processing disputes in the way an ordinary political community provides to its members. Three hundred years ago two Friends, John Bellers

and William Penn,[1] independently argued for a European political confederation as a means of eliminating war, while in our own time many people besides Friends have understood the need for international institutions of justice and of conflict management, an insight which led first to the founding of the League of Nations and then of the United Nations.

The relationship between the occurrence of mass violence and the absence of civil society has been made even more glaring in the post Cold War world as the collapse of both small nation states and of vast empires has resulted in an increase in strife and killing among ethnic and cultural groups.

Moreover, as the globe seems to shrink, as human populations multiply, and as the advance of scientific, technological and economic systems increases the volume and variety of the interactions which occur among the various peoples of the world, it becomes more and more clear that there needs to be some way to define the principles of justice which ought to adhere to these interactions. The operation of the global economy, the prevention of ethnic violence, the ending of arms trade and profiteering, the monitoring and enforcement of disarmament -- conventional, nuclear, biological and chemical disarmament -- and the protection of the environment will require the development of a body of international law governing these matters and a capacity on the part of the international community to enforce this body of law on behalf of the common good. As people concerned to work for a just peace, should we not face the fact that it is no more likely that we will achieve a reasonable state of peace in the world as a whole without international laws and institutions of justice than it would be reasonable to expect domestic tranquillity within villages, provinces or nations without the robust governmental institutions that operate in those spheres? Should we not, as peacemakers, recognize that the condition of international anarchy which thoughtful people like Penn and Bellers have always recognized to be dysfunctional has become extremely so under today's conditions, and that the historical task of the 21st Century will be to move beyond it?

If my supposition that under prevailing circumstances some evolution in the direction of a structured global order is inevitable, and that to talk of building peace without it is hardly

---

[1] In *An essay towards the present and future peace of Europe, by the establishment of a European diet, parliament or estates,* published in 1693, William Penn made the following proposal: "Now if the sovereign princes of Europe, who represent that society or independent state of men *(sic)* that was previous to the obligations of society, would for the same reason that engaged men first into society, viz, love of peace and order, agree to meet by their states deputies in a general diet, estates, or parliament, and there establish rules of justice for sovereign princes to observe one to another; and thus to meet yearly, or once in two or three years at the farthest, or as they shall see cause, and to be styled, the Sovereign or Imperial Diet, Parliament or State of Europe; before which sovereign assembly should be brought all differences depending between one sovereign and another that cannot be made up by private embassies before the sessions begin: and that if any of the sovereignties that constitute these imperial states shall refuse to submit their claim or pretensions to them, or to abide and perform the judgment thereof, and seek their remedy by arms, or delay their compliance beyond the time prefixed in their resolutions, all the sovereignties, united as one strength, shall compel the submission and performance of the sentence, with damages to the suffering party." Quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice,* the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain. (Paragraph 24:44)

reasonable, we then must turn to the question of how Friends ought to approach this issue. Are we prepared to take an active part in dialogue and advocacy regarding the fashioning of a more secure world order, or do we simply leave this to others? Do we think about the large philosophical issues which such a project inevitably entails, or do we content ourselves with our direct witness in small-scaled and somewhat scattered projects, leaving to others the task of designing the world order which is inevitable?

The question of establishing international institutions which would be capable of sustaining peace, of processing conflict, and of supporting justice raises anew the long and vexed history of the relationship between the religious sensibility and state power. On the one hand, there is a strong impulse within the church to see it as a responsibility of Christian people to participate actively in civic life and to advocate for and to help structure systems and institutions which bring the earthly city closer to the city of God. Much Quaker spirituality represents a full-flowering of this particular impulse. Friends have often insisted that we cannot draw a line between religious and secular affairs, and we have tended to see citizenship, community service and political activism to be natural expressions of the fundamentals of our faith. It would seem to follow from this stream of experience and thought that Friends should be proactively engaged in the extension of civil society into the international arena.

But there has also been an opposite tendency within the Christian church, a tendency which also finds expression in Friends' faith and practice. According to this line of thinking there are destined always to be deep and ineradicable flaws in human society, and a truly just or Christian social order is not really a feasible project. There is a long tradition of what might be called "other-worldly religiosity," in which it is assumed that an authentic Christian religious sensibility will take care not to be tainted by the things of the world, but will practice an etherialized spirituality which is somehow held apart from life as it is lived by most people. This kind of Christianity is usually thought to be diametrically opposed to the Quaker idea.

Yet there are definitely ways in which this notion has found expression in Quaker experience and practice, too. For example, George Fox and the first generation of Quaker pacifists drew a firm distinction between what Quakers themselves ought and ought not to do, on the one hand, and what the state was entitled to do, on the other. They thought it right that the state should resort to military action to keep order if need be. Isaac Penington, like other early Friends, recognized that governments were justified in "defending themselves against foreign invasions or making use of the sword to suppress the violent and evil-doers within their borders." Robert Barclay in his *Apology*, published in 1676, also recognized that what is true for a "separated society" (meaning the Religious Society of Friends) is not necessarily true for a government which represents a great mixture of people, problems and convictions.

While it is true that there may be insoluble conflicts between Quaker faith and certain public policies, there is a danger that by conceiving of ourselves as "a people apart" or as a "separated society" we and other Christian groups can collaborate in our own marginalization. This is convenient in that we can leave awkward and embarrassing problems of politics and of

society to others while we feel ourselves to be holier than they are. But it occurs at the cost of being irrelevant. In effect, we let other people do the difficult work for us and then complain about the outcome.

The passion for liberty, the idea that the best government is the government that governs least, and the perennial seductiveness of libertarianism and philosophical anarchism, all are in some sense tacit acknowledgments of the difficult and even tragic dimensions of the task of structuring a political community.

Every government, every civil society, every state, every nation, is imperfect. But not all political systems are completely and equally illegitimate, and some are far superior to others. One of the tasks of a healthy social order is that it seeks to protect the poor and the weak from the powerful and the despotic. It may be a lofty form of nonviolence to be willing to suffer injustice oneself rather than harm another; but is it lofty nonviolence simply to abandon others to the violence and injustice of predators, rather than come to their aid? While war may never be justified, the organization of civil society is not war, although it does admittedly involve coercion. The organization of civil society posits that it is better for unjust aggressors to be coerced than for their victims to suffer their aggressions. The restrained use of state power by public authorities according to established procedures and under constitutional safeguards actually ensures both liberty and community. Without them there would only be the liberty of the strong, which is despotism. The vulnerability of vast populations to the strong and the despotic is in fact the prevailing condition in the international arena today. In a civil society, in contrast, coercion is minimized by being monopolized under constitutional safeguards, and is in fact an indispensable condition for community. So casual hostility to the state or to civil society would seem to be indefensible.

We must in the end conclude that the idea that we can be related to God and not the world, that we can practice a spirituality which is not political, is foreign to both Quakerism and Christianity. And as a new world order inevitably emerges, we must further conclude that if we leave the politics of this newly emerging world order to those who find it enjoyable, profitable, or in some way useful to themselves, it will loose its moral structure and purpose and be turned into an affair of sectarian interests and personal ambitions. As is the case at the village, provincial and national levels, so will it prove to be true on the global level: politics can be saved only by being practiced conscientiously by everybody.

Given the understanding that our religious convictions require us to exercise responsibility at a global level as well as in local and national politics, there follows the closely related question of just how this responsibility will be exercised. In particular there arises the question of how proactive we should be in visualizing in specific terms just what an international political order would look like. Are we willing to do the hard thinking necessary to develop a vision around which people can rally in the struggle to establish a peaceable world?

It might be useful in order to illuminate the problem we face today in visualizing a peace-

sustaining global order to reflect back on the revolutionary transitions of the seventeenth century, when Quakerism was founded and when English society itself was making the transition from feudalism to modernity. Just how did Quakers participate in the task of visualizing and promoting the new order which was to succeed feudalism?

Early Quakers definitely believed that the lives of individuals and of societies ought to be ordered according to the will of God. Friends, in the early days of their movement, sought to advance an individual and communal piety through which people would be led to live in a coherent and consistent way according to the Divine will for human life. But just what would this Godly society look like? As one examines history, early Friends seemed to know quite well what they did not like -- tithes, insincere clergy people, oppression and exploitation by an aristocratic class -- but one looks in vain for a clear positive vision. How did Friends imagine that society could be organized? It is one thing to refuse to pay the king hat honor and to affirm the equality of all human beings. It is quite another thing to envision and then to establish a social order in which some legitimate authority can be identified and permitted to act for the common good.

For those outside the Religious Society of Friends, centuries of religious war and strife had begun to convince thoughtful people that it would be useful to de-emphasize spiritual things and to rely on reason and human good nature to iron out social arrangements. As religious warfare and strife continued on relentlessly, the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Adam Smith appeared to have a compelling logic, a logic which coopted Quakers themselves before much time had passed. Social contract theory offered a philosophical legitimization of democratic forms in contrast to the monarchy, and the market theories of Adam Smith offered both a compelling alternative to the feudal economic order and, through the dispersion of economic power which it seemed to promise, a reinforcement of democratic practice and theory. The idea that society should express God's will for humankind was swept aside. Religion was banished to private spaces and to Sunday morning. Large spheres of human activity, most especially the economy, were allowed to function in an amoral way on the basis of ground rules established out of human contrivance and convenience. Oliver Cromwell's move toward a capitalist ethos, a move which tended to fuel an alienation between himself and George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, might have been wisely chosen as the best option available, or at least the best option that was reasonably visible at the time. It did, after all, usher in an unprecedented period of prosperity for the English nation and for North Atlantic civilization generally. The situation is perhaps an example of how, in the realm of politics, one cannot fight something with nothing.

In 1993 Britain Yearly Meeting published a booklet entitled *The Quaker Peace Testimony: A Workbook for Individuals and Groups*. There are many things about the booklet worth noting, but one thing included in it is an article on what a Quaker testimony is. The article observes that the working out of the testimonies in social life often appears to be negative: a refusal to kill, a refusal to swear, a refusal to pay tithes, a refusal to take off our hats to any but God. While we ourselves have a sense that these negative actions arise from a positive experience of a creative, redeeming, healing life and power, this must, at least from the point of view of

outside observers, require a lot of intuition to get a hold of specifically.

Again this reticence about etching out in concrete terms a positive vision, which in effect is a sort of abdication of the field to others who are willing to do so, is not unique to Friends within the community of Christian faith. The history of Christianity is a long series of equivocations about the project of visualizing a just society. Some church people have been genuine revolutionaries, but most have both acknowledged the fallen nature of the prevailing social order while also allowing themselves to be co-opted by it. Throughout Christian history the official Church has tended to be an apologist for whatever status quo prevailed, holding its conspicuous evils to be inevitable given the fallen state of human nature. It is only on relatively rare occasions since the age of the European Enlightenment that Christian groups have sought to merge the city of God with the earthly city, as the Puritans did in the Massachusetts Commonwealth and as William Penn did with his Holy Experiment in Pennsylvania. But one must quickly observe that these experiments in developing a God-governed society did not always produce attractive results.

Christian reticence about engaging in an exercise of visualizing a just social order is reinforced by the experience in modern times with political ideologies. A modern revolutionary ideology like Marxism tries not merely to alleviate particular social wrongs, but rather presumes to destroy the common root of all social evil. Its goal is comprehensive and lasting social harmony based on achieving a perfectedness of human nature itself. This obviously contrasts with the belief of many Christians about the fallen state of the human condition and the resulting ineradicable imperfections of human society. The revolutionary aspirations of Marxism seem like an extraordinary degree of hubris and idolatry to Christians. The fact that there is not a single example in our time of a determined effort to produce immediate and sweeping change that has not ended in tyranny, and in other conditions immeasurably worse than those perpetrated by the old social order, have caused many Christians to undertake a prophetic role very modestly, stressing patience, attentiveness and availability, emphasizing waiting for God's call in history, rather than seeking to promote dynamic action. Christian prophecy, then, tends to be reduced to a piece-meal and scattered concern with individually identifiable evils, rather than advancing a total vision for the human community.

Modern day Friends are, for quite understandable reasons, straddling a fence on these issues. On the one hand, we are influenced by the long centuries of Christian thought which tend to doubt that the ideal of the just society is actually achievable. On the other hand, we are also influenced by streams of thought flowing from diverse modern sources -- secular liberalism, Marxism, democratic socialism -- all of which are rooted in the conviction that a just society *can* be created and *must* be created soon.

In contemporary times each of us must come to understand that just as we are a citizen of our town or village, of our state or province, and of our nation, we are also citizens of a worldwide human commonwealth. The building of peace in our world depends upon our willingness to participate in the creative, sustaining and ordering work of God in this worldwide

human commonwealth just as much as it requires a conscientious attention to our civic duties on the local, regional and national levels. As members of the human family we are parts of an organic whole. We are interdependent, and our interdependence is an image or a sign of the mutuality inherent in the Creation itself.

One of the most significant things God requires of us is coming to terms with finitude, with limitations of all sorts: the limits of bodies that waste away and die; the limits of a planet the resources of which are exhaustible; our boundedness as a species which has appeared only lately in the unfolding drama of the Creation and which will eventually suffer extinction.

In the face of finitude we must make choices in complex circumstances and determine wise policies for collective action. At the same time we must acknowledge that in our simple humanity there are limits to our knowledge, limits to our foreknowledge, and limits to the capacity we have to control many of the consequences of our actions. Conflicting values and claims, each of which can be reasonably defended, cannot always be brought into harmony. Costs are involved in every complex choice; some properly valued ends cannot be achieved because others are deemed to be of greater merit. We will always find that tragedy is present in political and social life even as we seek to be responsive to the will of God. What is constraining for some persons will necessarily occur in the pursuit of what is an improvement for others. Indeed, if this were not so, virtue, justice and peace would be easy, for there would be no challenge to it.

Seen this way, the difficulties we face are not so much in a fallen human nature as in our circumstances. A condition of anarchy produces a natural tendency in people to reduce the risks to themselves through amassing power and wealth, even if this security must be wrested from others through violence and coercion and warfare. An ordered civil community, however, at least makes possible the fair working out of our interdependence, a sharing of burdens in some equitable fashion, procedures for resolving conflicts, and most important, an arena in which to enact key the spiritual virtues which bring the earthly city closer to the city of God -- the virtues of gratitude, mutual respect, a sense of obligation, repentance, readiness to forgive, patience, tolerance, trust, trustworthiness, love, and the willing restriction of our individual interests and desires for the sake of others and of the whole.

To be peacemakers in the modern era, as in any time, requires patience, love and endurance. To be peacemakers is to be willing to think broadly and comprehensively, yet to avoid oversimplification and ideology. It is to be willing to undertake political action which is wise and compassionate. It means standing apart from the disorder of the world, but at the same time engaging actively with all those seeking a community which includes all nations and all peoples. It is to recognize that we cannot be absolute masters of our historical circumstances, yet it is to be willing to contemplate the life and suffering of distant peoples, as well as those in our own back yards, and to respond in the circumstances in which we find ourselves to the needs of a universal humanity.

It is to rely in our own weakness on the strength of God. It is to listen for the voice of the

Holy Spirit which allows us to see anew the situation we inhabit, the Holy Spirit which shows us what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done. It is to realize that justice and peace are legitimately the goals both of the city of God and of the earthly political order, and that our life in religion and our life as citizens compliment rather than contradict each other. It is to do work which is neither desperate nor shrill, nor is it a dull and relentless drive toward some narrow ideologic end. Rather, it is to become instruments of the Divine Creative Plan, constantly upbuilding that which folly threatens to dissolve, helping the world's people grow together as a community through the reconciling love of the One in whom all things are One.